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Brief Submission to the Standing Committee On The Status of Women for its Study on Gender-Based Violence and Femicides

Aura Freedom is a grassroots, intersectional feminist organization working to eradicate male violence against women and human trafficking through advocacy, education, research, policy change, media reform and survivor support. In 2023, Aura Freedom launched the award-winning “For Her” campaign to bring light to femicide in Canada, an informal petition signed by over 1300 Canadians calling on the Government of Canada to take meaningful steps towards ending femicide, and an educational microsite created in partnership with the Canadian Femicide Observatory for Justice and Accountability and Native Women’s Resource Centre of Toronto.

Background

Femicide is the killing of a woman or girl because of their sex or gender, mostly by men, driven by misogyny (i.e. the hatred of women) and a need to maintain power and control over their victims. It is the most violent manifestation of misogyny - the ultimate control of women’s and girls’ bodies, and a means to dictate their fate and, ultimately, their death.¹ As such, femicide is deeply connected to gender inequality, patriarchy, colonialism, and entrenched beliefs around men and women.² In Canada, a woman is killed every 2 days,³ with two-thirds of police-reported femicides perpetrated by an intimate partner.⁴ Between 2018-2022, femicides of women by a male accused increased 27%.⁵ Simply put, femicide is an emergency in Canada. While femicide is committed against women from all walks of life, it must be recognized that some women and girls are disproportionately at risk of femicide because of who they are or where they live. Multiple or overlapping identities facing discrimination (e.g., sex/gender, race, class, age, sexuality, ability, geography, etc.) compounds the risk of femicide.⁶

There is global recognition of femicide as a distinct form of killing, one warranting a distinct label and its own examination for effective prevention; however, femicide is not currently recognized in Canada’s Criminal Code. Globally, 22 other countries have the term femicide in legislature, or use the term to classify distinct offenses.⁷ In 2018, Canada made a commitment to sign a global convention aiming to create initiatives and programs that would investigate, prevent and eliminate femicide; however, Canada is 1 of only 3 countries yet to fulfill this commitment.⁸ Moreover, there persists a collective hesitancy among police forces and media in Canada to adopt and use the term femicide, further affecting how it is understood by the public. Some police forces say it is because they only use terms mentioned or defined in the Criminal Code, and media sources say that they only report what they get from police; however, we know that “intimate partner violence”, “family violence”, “domestic violence”, “sex trafficking” and other terms are not named in the Criminal Code, but are regularly used by police forces and media across the country.⁹ This summer, Ottawa police labelled a murder as a “femicide” for the first time,¹⁰ proving public acknowledgement of femicide (an important preliminary step) by authoritative systems in Canada is possible.

Femicide is distinct from Homicide

Femicide is a form of murder underscoring “how” and “why” women are killed, which is distinct from how men and boys are killed - although both are primarily killed by men.¹¹ When men are murdered, research shows it is rarely connected to maintaining power and control in an intimate or familial relationship - and is rarely connected to the hatred of men.¹² Therefore, unlike homicide, femicide is an inherently gendered crime. The root causes of femicide differ from other forms of murder, and are intricately related to misogyny, the position of women in society, gender roles, unequal distributions of power based on gender, and other gender-based beliefs and misogynistic systems. Therefore, while women and girls can be, and are, killed by strangers, they face the greatest danger in their own homes, and are most likely to be killed by men that they know well (intimate partners, husbands, fathers, brothers, sons, etc.).¹³ In short, four out of five women and girls in Canada are killed by a male they should have been able to trust.¹⁴

Additionally, due to the oppressive systems and social beliefs that perpetuate femicides, femicides are distinctly normalized and sanitized by society. As women are most frequently killed by the men closest to them, these murders are often (inaccurately) described as a private form of violence, where femicides are often described as situations in which there is “no further threat to public safety.” However, femicides are intricately linked to public violence, public hate, and public oppression against women and girls, and the ongoing public issue of male violence against women. When a woman is killed in Canada every two days, we know there is an urgent, and ongoing threat to public safety, rooted in a combination of patriarchy and misogyny, and intersecting oppressive beliefs that serve to “explain away” femicide and the ongoing danger to women, girls, and gender-diverse peoples that exists in Canada.

Femicides are excused, explained away and publicly justified in several ways. Perpetrators are described as “madmen”, “monsters”, and generally as outliers - despite the fact men are killing women in Canada every 2 days.¹⁵ These femicides are seen as private and/or random acts of violence, and not as preventable manifestations of control over women and girls, nor seen as connected to the wider social issues and systemic oppressions that continue to perpetuate gender-based violence (GBV). Further, femicides such as those labelled ‘honour killings’ or those as the result of female genital mutilation, may be “explained away” by attributing the murder of women to non-western cultures - when the true root causes are the same as femicides within western cultures: misogyny, patriarchy, and intersecting oppressive systems. Femicides may also be minimized through victim-blaming, as is often the case with various forms of GBV, placing the onus of preventing GBV women on victims/survivors rather than the perpetrators, community, and society around them. Women are predominantly killed by the men closest to them, and yet, as Professor Myrna Dawson of the Canadian Femicide Observatory coined the ‘Intimacy Discount’, “male violence against women is seen as less severe the greater the intimacy between the perpetrator and the victim/survivor.”¹⁶

Femicide Is Intricately Linked to Other Forms of Gender-Based Violence

As women are most often killed by their intimate partners, with Canadian women being nine times more likely to be killed by an intimate partner than a stranger,¹⁷ the connections between femicide and intimate partner violence (IPV) are well understood. Women particularly face risk of intimate partner femicide during separation, wherein 77% of intimate partner femicides occur upon separation, and women continue to face a 75% increase of violence upon separation for at least two years.¹⁸ We also know that femicide can and does happen even when there has been no physical violence reported, and that a consistent precursor to femicide by an intimate partner is coercive control.¹⁹ This is why Aura Freedom has been advocating for the screening of coercive control in IPV risk assessments, and more generally in GBV advocacy efforts, resources, tools, and initiatives.

Another form of violence against women is “slow femicide”, which captures “...all the harms done to women that result in a slow death - while they are still living.”²⁰ It includes “...abused women forced into homelessness, precarious employment, poverty, suicidal ideation and self-harm, and so many other social risks that come from the results of male violence against women and children.”²¹ Further, we know that

gender-based violence directly and indirectly threatens women's lives, in that the risk of becoming suicidal is three to five times higher for women who have experienced violence.²² It is important that we acknowledge the connection between what would be labelled as a suicide, and the underlying causes and context of GBV that lead to some women's deaths.

The Final Report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG) found that Indigenous women are twelve times more likely to be killed than any other woman in Canada.²³ At least one in every five women and girls killed in Canada were Indigenous, despite only representing approximately five per cent of the population.²⁴ The crisis that is MMIWG has been internationally recognized as a genocide, conducted through the femicides of Indigenous women and girls, aiming to further systematically break down Indigenous communities and cultures through the genocide of Indigenous women (often matriarchs and stewards of culture in their families/communities).²⁵

Femicide must also be understood in the context of human trafficking, as survivors of human trafficking are disproportionately at risk of femicide, wherein traffickers and their buyers may enforce control over those being trafficked through violence, and/or human trafficking survivors may be at risk of femicide as a result of the sexual violence acts committed against them while being trafficked.

Further, we know that due to underlying systems such as patriarchy, sexism, and more, which perpetuate the stigmatization and discrimination faced by those who do sex work, sex workers are also at higher risk of femicide, as well as having femicides against them dismissed or minimized, with their field of work often overemphasized in their deaths to victim-blame them.

Other Forms of Violence in the Context of Femicide

Other forms of violence are conducted in the context of femicide. For example, "murder-suicides" are often cases of femicide and male violence against women, though rarely labelled as such. Over the past decade in Canada, 77% of murder-suicide incidents involve at least one victim related to the killer, most often their intimate partner.²⁶ Besides murder-suicides, femicide often results in the deaths of multiple victims in addition to the woman who was the male perpetrator's primary target. The Canadian Femicide Observatory research tells us that in addition to the 850 women and girls killed by femicide between 2018-2022, a further 138 victims were also killed. Further, "mass killings" are conducted in the context of "mass femicides". A number of Canadian mass killings (i.e., Montreal Massacre, Toronto Van Attack, Nova Scotia Mass Shooting) are also mass femicides, and deeply connected to misogyny and incel culture. It's important we begin to connect the dots between misogyny, white supremacy, male violence against women, and mass killings/mass femicide.²⁷ In extreme cases, we see perpetrators of IPV kill their children to maintain control and punish mothers for leaving, also known as revenge filicide. We have seen this happen to Keira Kagan, the motivation behind Keira's Law - which aims to have Family Court judges trained in domestic violence. Keira, who was later killed by her biological father, was forced to see him by Family Court even after numerous reports of IPV by her mother, Dr. Jennifer Kagan. In Canada, approximately 30 children are murdered in this way every year.²⁸ Where men may not have access to the woman they are intending to control and/or harm, they may instead target their children.

Community Impacts of Femicide

Femicide is fracturing families and communities, creating intergenerational trauma, which in turn contributes to intergenerational poverty, homelessness, substance use, unemployment, poor health outcomes, and more. Families, loved ones, and the surrounding communities of victims of femicide will face loss that perpetuate collective trauma, psychological and emotional impacts and needs, and more. Children particularly face a number of devastating impacts of femicide and gender-based violence. Nine out of ten women killed in Canada had at least one child, leaving at least 868 children in Canada without their mothers between 2018-2022 as a result of femicide.²⁹ Further, the 362,000 children who witness IPV in Canada each year have double the rate of psychiatric disorders.³⁰

Femicide is Preventable

In fact, it is one of the most preventable forms of murder, in that there are already well-known and established risk factors which would allow systems (i.e. police, governmental, justice/legal entities), as well as service providers, to prevent femicide - 7 or more risk factors were found in over 70% of intimate murders of women and children.³¹ What's missing is the commitment to investing in comprehensive support and prevention efforts for those at risk.

Recognizing Femicide

Aura Freedom continues to advocate for the recognition of femicide in Canada's Criminal Code, and of the femicide epidemic in Canada, one of the calls made during our *For Her* campaign. When we take a true gendered lens to preventing and addressing femicide, we will also see reductions to other forms of gender-based violence and harmful community impacts - as we know the pervasive impact of femicide on individuals, families, communities, and Canada as a whole. Recognizing femicide would mean Canada can send a clear message that male violence against women and girls will not be tolerated, prompting comprehensive investment to its eradication. Further, doing so legitimizes femicide and its intersecting forms, such as MMIWG2S, as urgent social issues. However, recognition alone is insufficient and cannot be done in isolation - it must be part of a broader, long-term strategy extending beyond the legislature to address other public systems, the greater society, and importantly, the root causes that perpetuate and normalize gender-based violence and femicide (i.e. misogyny, patriarchy, gender roles and perceptions, and more).

Calls to Action

Aura Freedom's Calls to Action reflect our calls made in our informal petition to call on the Government of Canada to take meaningful steps towards ending femicide across the country:

- 1) *Formally recognize femicide as a distinct form of violence that differs from homicide, in legislation and/or in the Criminal Code.*
- 2) *Expedite implementation of the National Action Plan to End Gender-Based Violence, and ensure this work is community-led and robustly funded.*
- 3) *Expedite the process of implementing the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA+ People National Action Plan, and the 231 Calls for Justice of the National Inquiry into MMIWG, and ensure this work is Indigenous-led and robustly funded.*
- 4) *Declare femicide an urgent emergency in Canada and prioritize it accordingly.*

We thank the Committee for considering this brief on femicide, and look forward to working closer with you in the future. For further information, please contact Marissa Kokkoros at marissa@aurafreedom.org, or Danielle Warren at danielle@aurafreedom.org.

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- ² Aura Freedom International, Canadian Femicide Observatory, and Native Women’s Resource Centre. “The Body Bag For Her.” Aura Freedom International, 2023. <https://aurafreedom.org/forher/>
- ³ Canadian Femicide Observatory for Justice and Accountability. (2023). “#CallItFemicide: Understanding sex/gender-related killings of women and girls in Canada, 2018-2022.” <https://femicideincanada.ca/callitfemicide2018-2022.pdf>
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- ⁶ Aura Freedom International, Canadian Femicide Observatory, and Native Women’s Resource Centre. “The Body Bag For Her.” Aura Freedom International, 2023. <https://aurafreedom.org/forher/>
- ⁷ Canadian Femicide Observatory for Justice and Accountability. (2024). “Femicide & Law”. <https://femicideincanada.ca/femicide-law/>
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- ¹³ Ibid.
- ¹⁴ Aura Freedom International, Canadian Femicide Observatory, and Native Women’s Resource Centre. “The Body Bag For Her.” Aura Freedom International, 2023. <https://aurafreedom.org/forher/>
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